

12. SOME NOTES ON THE HABITS OF THE
INDIAN RAT SNAKE (*PTYAS MUCOSUS* LINN.) IN
A LOCALITY NEAR BOMBAY

Collecting reptiles in an area on the Ghodbunder Road (Thana Dist.) during the last year, I have found the Dhaman or Rat Snake to be the most common large terrestrial snake. Local people often misleadingly call dhamans 'Nag' or 'Nagin', when actually cobras are far less common (or at least not in evidence). In the last year I have seen about 35 dhamans (28 caught) and seen 5 cobras (4 caught). Five of the twenty-eight dhamans were juveniles three feet or under in length, but most of those seen and caught averaged 6-7 feet, the maximum being eight feet four inches (this large specimen was in the act of stalking a hare which was sitting motionless watching the snake, seemingly transfixed with interest and/or fear, but definitely not hypnotized as it was quick to recognize us as intruders and make off, the snake being detained by means of leap and a grab). Almost half the dhamans were taken from village houses and huts at the request of the human residents. The houses often have rat nests and rats in residence which are of course the attraction to the snakes. They are sometimes found coiled in a rats' nest digesting the previous occupants.

All dhamans are excitable and may bite (though somewhat clumsily) at first, but most will become tame if handled regularly. Six of those caught emitted a fairly loud 'growl' from deep in the throat when first grabbed (recorded by Col. Wall). When approached in a corner, or cage they may swell up their throats and arch the neck and body and make long lunges with partly open mouth. When encountered in thick bush they often get away, having the advantage in thorny and rocky places. They may be captured by either jumping on them before they get away (although their superficial resemblance to cobras makes this a dubious practice) or a helper could try to head the snake off and drive it toward you (if one keeps still, a snake may crawl right up to, over, and past you with no cognizance of what you are). I have dug them out of rat tunnels, from under the roots of trees, from rock piles, rubbish piles and from out of hollow trees.

In the one area concerned the colour variation has been from a deep olive (almost black) to very light brown in adults, the young always being a medium greenish-brown. Most specimens, especially young ones, feed well in captivity on frogs, rats and birds: even rats 24 hours dead are taken. Most adult dhamans have scars (and some-

times fresh cuts) inflicted by rats which they kill by pressure from their body and mouth rather than constriction in the sense of tightening coils; frogs are swallowed alive.

On July 13 one 6½ feet dhaman laid 14 eggs; one spoiled and thirteen hatched on Sept. 16, 17; average length of young was 385 mm.

Most places in and around Bombay that have some extensive gardens or heavy growth provide food and shelter for the Indian rat snake; they are to be found on Cumballa and Malabar Hills and parts of Colaba in Bombay proper. From Worli and Dadar onwards they become increasingly common as unused property is more extensive.

There is little doubt that this rodent-destroying snake should be protected, especially now that there is a demand for their skins. It is a species that survives well in the vicinity of man (provided man does not destroy it), is innocuous and is probably a more efficient rat-catcher than any other creature.

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January, 1969.

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13. FOOD AND FEEDING HABITS OF THE INDIAN SAND SKINK, *OPHIOMORUS TRIDACTYLUS* (BLYTH) BOULENGER

Ophiomorus tridactylus usually feeds in the evening, shifting its time of emergence according to the prevailing temperature. During summer it feeds late in the evening but in winter in the early hours just after sun-set. During rains and on windy days it does not emerge at all. Once at Barmer (1 Sept., 1967), I was able to collect 35 specimens between 8 and 10 p.m., but the next night at the same time with a strong, cool wind blowing, only 3 were caught.

Usually these skinks keep only their heads above the sand and stay motionless. Any moving prey coming near their mouth is snapped at. Ordinarily the prey is crushed by the jaws and battered on the ground before being swallowed. Observations on the mode of feeding were also made in semi-captive and captive conditions.

Semi-captivity: A dozen skinks of both sexes, were kept in an enclosure measuring 120×90 cm, which had a boundary wall to prevent their escape. This enclosure was built away from human